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Family Matters

By

Jennifer L. Rau

A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the

Requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Professional Writing in the Department of
English

In the College of Humanities and Social Sciences of Kennesaw State University

Kennesaw, Georgia

2012

Family Matters

Capstone – Spring 2012

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Certificate of Approval

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At the May 2012 graduation

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Not for a Million Dollars

Deciding which works to include in the Capstone was a daunting task. At first I feared that I would be seen as a “jack of all trades and a master of none”; however, after careful consideration, the following three genres (non-fiction, fiction, and poetry) exhibit the depth of my learning in the MAPW program. The non-fiction genre contains two pieces. The fiction genre has one short story. The poetry genre will be composed of eight poems varying in length, subject matter, and form.

I have always been fascinated by the stories my grandmother used to tell me about growing up without televisions, refrigerators, and other modern conveniences. It occurred to me that I could relay some of these stories through various genres of writing. The MAPW program provided me with the tools and instruction necessary to bring those stories to life. They may be in the form of a poem, a short story, or a memoir, but most importantly, the stories have been told.

Before beginning this program, I asked myself one question – “Why do I write?” It was a question I had come across while reading Natalie Goldberg’s Writing Down the Bones. I didn’t really know the answer to that question at first. I knew it wasn’t to make a million dollars – even though that would be great. It wasn’t to gain notoriety, or to expose some deep family secret. Goldberg states, “It’s a good and haunting question to explore, not so you can find the one final reason, but to see how writing permeates your life with many reasons” (146). I write because I have a story to tell. It’s not therapeutic or to prove something to myself. When something inspires me, I have to write about it.

One of my favorite authors of all time is Thomas Hardy. For whatever reason, I have always loved the book, Far from the Madding Crowd. Everyone always asks me

why and I can't pinpoint one specific thing about the book that I like. When I sit down to read it, I just love the way it makes me feel. The contempt I feel for Bathsheba when she turns down Farmer Oak in the first few pages keeps me reading. The sorrow I feel for Farmer Oak as he pines for someone that doesn't want him keeps me reading. I want to write books like that. I think it is because of the emotional ride that exists for the reader. I want my stories to carry that same profoundness. If they ever will is not for me to decide, but the bottom line is that I want to write stories that people want to read. Deep down every writer wants that. If they didn't then what's the point?

Throughout this process, I wondered how on earth I was going to pull everything together. Once I started rereading all of the stories and poems, I realized that they all have one thing in common (except for a couple of silly poems). Family is a theme that appears in every piece. "Playing Moses" speaks about the loss of family, whereas "Time Travel" is the discovery of an entirely new family. The family theme is something that I want to continue to write and expound upon, especially as I begin the journey of starting my own family.

"Letters from Santa Claus" also focuses on the family dynamic. It is very difficult to write about the loss of a child, but the story still needed to be told. This story takes place during the 1930's. There are different cultural norms and realities that must be addressed and appreciated when writing within a specific time period.

Another aspect of writing that I want to continue to explore is incorporating history into my stories. Many of the pieces I write are rooted in history. I studied various works of historical fiction during my Independent Study with Dr. Laura Dabundo in order to develop my own writing. Just adding a quick reference or two in a story does not

produce a work of historical fiction. I found through research and evaluation that in order for a work to be successful historically it must include many references to history throughout the work, dialogue (when dialogue is used) that is authentic to the time period, as well as accurate reflections of people and places, often represented by clothing, music, and specific items. Examples of great historical works of fiction are The Grapes of Wrath by John Steinbeck (a Pulitzer Prize winner), Out of the Dust by Karen Hesse (a Newberry Award winner), and Now In November by Josephine Johnson (a Pulitzer Prize winner).

By continuing to write about the family dynamic and incorporating history into my writing, I will continue to grow and excel as a writer. Regardless of the genre, writing stories about families throughout history is what I am passionate about and ultimately what interests me.

I have to admit, I always thought that non-fiction was just a genre where people talked about themselves. It is that, of course; however, talking about oneself and telling a story about oneself are two completely different entities. As Judith Barrington points out, “in order for the reader to care about what you make of your life, there has to be an engaging voice in the writing – a voice that captures a personality” (21). I never really understood this concept until taking Dr. Linda Niemann’s Creative Non-fiction class in the fall of 2010. Non-fiction is telling a story that just so happens to be true. Rick Bragg’s Ava’s Man is a great example of this concept. The story reads very much like fiction, but is entirely true. The voice, as Barrington points out, has personality. Voice is the reason non-fiction and I get along so well, because I have a very distinct voice in my writing.

Non-fiction did not come naturally to me at first, but I have truly enjoyed learning the craft of non-fiction writing. I was especially moved by Rick Bragg's book Ava's Man. I was so amazed at the idea of writing a non-fiction piece about someone that the author never knew based solely on the accounts of others. It was really something that made me want to continue writing stories about my grandmother. If he didn't know Charlie and was able to write such a brilliant book, what could I do? I actually knew my grandmother. The real blockade, however, is that everyone who could provide me with any information about my grandmother is now dead. This leaves me in a precarious position, because I can't do my grandmother justice by simply writing about the little snippets I know.

Reading Bragg's book solidified my desire to write the stories about my grandmother's life. As much as I'd love to write that amazing non-fiction saga, I don't think I have enough to make it work. The draw of having a real story makes it so much more interesting to the reader. Is there a middle ground between fiction and non-fiction? I had to find the balance between which stories were worth keeping truthful, and which ones needed to incorporate fictional elements in order to work.

"Time Travel" is a story that has been with me for over five years. I was a new teacher with only four months of experience walking into a middle school on the wrong side of town. I acted like I knew what I was doing, but in reality, I was just as lost as the students (and probably more scared). I did have one thing – passion. Unfortunately, I didn't see something in one student who ended up committing suicide. It was one of those moments in my life where I blamed myself even though I probably couldn't have done anything. Writing this story helped me to see that it wasn't my fault. It taught me

that I am much more than a teacher to my students; I am a mentor, sometimes a mother, a consoler, an inspirer, and sometimes teacher shows up last. I always wondered if that student, Brendan, knew that I cared about him. Now I make sure that I never have to ask myself that question.

“Playing Moses” is very different than “Time Travel.” I wrote this piece from my perspective as a child. When I think about how I coped with the death of my grandmother four years ago, I realize that I dealt with death much differently as a young girl. I lost my grandfather and my uncle, who were both a huge part of my life, within a few years of each other. I was only seven and ten years old, respectively. I hope that this piece accurately portrays how a child would cope with loss as well as how the people I cared about shaped me into the person I am today without even realizing it.

I used to be of the school of thought that writers should write what they know. I immediately began to question what I know (which was not as much as I had once thought) – so what on earth would I write about? Jon Gardner in The Art of Fiction: Notes on Craft for Young Writers addresses this common adage among fiction writers. “Nothing can be more limiting to the imagination, nothing is quicker to turn on the psyche’s censoring devices and distortion systems, than trying to write truthfully and interestingly about one’s own home town...” (Gardner 18). Trying to break myself of this was difficult and I fought it at every turn. I had convinced myself that I must write the truth about grandma and grandpa, mom and dad, and what happened when I was a child. What I didn’t realize until I began workshopping my stories is that some of the things that happened weren’t all that interesting. Fiction allows me to write the stories I

want to write, staying true to the parts that matter and fictionalizing the parts that need a little help.

“Letters from Santa Claus” has been in the works for several years. I was informed by my great-uncle at my grandmother’s funeral that she used to write him letters posing as Santa Claus. I thought it was the sweetest story I had ever heard. It made me love my grandmother that much more. I wanted to write a story about it, but had only the bare bones of what happened. Though I wrote from what I knew, I had to do a lot of research on the time period and incorporate fictional elements in order to make the story work. My ultimate goal for this piece was to show that sometimes no matter what, sometimes we have no control over the events that occur in our own lives.

Fiction and Non-fiction seemed a perfect fit for me, but I always wanted to improve my poetic skills. Poetry and I have always had a love-hate relationship. I have never considered myself to be a poet or to possess any poetic qualities. Even in my undergraduate program, my poetry professor gave me no hope – a proverbial flat-line for poetic potential. Looking at some of the poems I wrote in my undergraduate program, I can see the logic in his analysis; however, it would have been nice to have someone provide some encouragement from time to time. As an undergraduate, I was limited in experience and depth of knowledge, which I feel made a difference in the quality of my writing – both prose and poetry. This is not to say that someone without a lot of life experience can’t write poetry, but surely my perspective on a lot of issues has changed and been enriched. Now that I have completed a graduate poetry class, I can honestly say that I feel much more at ease writing poetry. A lot of the intimidation and uncertainty have disappeared. I think it is primarily because of the camaraderie developed amongst

peers and the understanding that we are all learning regardless of our experience levels. I never really understood what my problem was – did I just not understand how to write poetry? Maybe it just wasn't my thing. I had believed that until the spring semester of 2011. I just needed the right catalyst and a little motivation. I hadn't been exposed to poetry that inspired me to write, nor had I written anything of inspiration - quite the conundrum. After reading books of poetry by Wyn Cooper, Tania Rochelle, and Meg Kearney, I realized that there was an entirely different type of poetry out there of which I had never been exposed. I was also reintroduced to Theodore Roethke. His poem, *Papa's Waltz*, had a profound impact on me in its effective use of humor mixed with seriousness at the same time. One of my earliest poems, "The Fall," was originally a rhyming poem, but it failed miserably in its attempt to lighten the subject matter because the rhymes were forced. In Roethke's poem, rhyme was used so seamlessly that the reader almost didn't even realize it was there. It was then that I realized – if the rhyme isn't there, don't force it. My revision of "The Fall" is completely different because of this realization. Instead of forcing rhyme and distracting the reader, I went into the persona's mind, recreated the poem completely, and saved only the image that everyone in the class was interested in – the pantyhose around the persona's neck. I was successful in incorporating rhyme into a poem later in the semester with "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Bathroom." The poem was comical and rhyme seemed to flow naturally.

One of the recurring discussions throughout the revision process (in both prose and poetry) was that of restraint. Because my poems were mostly narratives, this was of particular interest to me. How much information do I need to include in order to allow

readers access without telling him exactly what to feel or think? This was a challenge for me during this class, but one that I was ready and willing to face. Seeing the growth from my first poem to my poems written later in the semester, I feel that I have developed that technique, but am not too proud to admit that I still have a way to go in terms of knowing when to hold back in some cases.

One of my areas of concern was the lack of exposure I had to contemporary poetry. I had, of course, read most of the “dead” poets, but never really looked into the contemporary poets. Reading the selections for this course expanded my knowledge and allowed me to see that poetry can be as simple as four lines. There is no recipe for a great poem. It reminds me of the beginning of the film, *Dead Poets Society*. Robin Williams goes through the long explanation of what makes up a great poem and then has all of the students rip that section out of the textbook. Poetry cannot be put into a box and limited to a specific ideal.

“Pennzoil: A True Story” and “A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Bathroom” are fun poems about two head injuries I received. The first is a not-so-funny episode of passing out due to a car accident, the second is a funny incident about passing out. I would not consider these poems deep by any means, but they served their purposes – to make people laugh and to dramatize a moment in my life that is still somewhat unclear.

The remaining poems, “Little Girls Should Have Dolls,” “Don’t Let Go,” “The Fall,” “Three Seconds,” “Through the Window,” and “Skipping Stones,” all carry a similar narrative style. They predominantly focus on stories my grandmother used to tell me. These are the same stories that may never become a three hundred page novel, but

can be told effectively through one page of poetry. All of these poems tell a collective story about hardship and loss.

Each genre holds a special place in my heart. There are stories that I have always wanted to tell, but did not necessarily have the right medium in which to tell them. I found the outlet for stories that I thought would always be trapped in my head. Poetry allows me to just come out and say it – skip all the prose and dialogue and just get to the point. Non-fiction permits me to tell a story that would otherwise remain locked away. Fiction gives me the license to draw outside of the lines and not hold the truth so dear. Storytelling, whether true or not, can take place in any of these forms. Not every story requires three hundred pages to be effective; some stories only need one page.

Non-fiction

Time Travel

The blood rushed to my cheeks as the morning bell sounded. In less than five minutes twenty-eight seventh graders would corral into my classroom and plop themselves into the rickety blue and faux wood-grain desks. The fantasy world I had created in my classroom, complete with Dr. Seuss posters, intricately placed borders and numerous books, would soon be sucked into the whirlwind known as middle school.

It was my first crack teaching middle school. I had taught eleventh grade Honors English the year before, but I quickly learned that middle school is an entirely different animal - much fiercer. Think Serengeti versus Disney's Animal Kingdom. The minute their parents dropped them off in front of the school or they herded off the bus – the quiet refuge of my office was no more. Everything that happened to me, however, was my own fault because I had been warned.

“Middle school is not for everyone,” several teachers said as they introduced themselves during pre-planning.

I could handle this. How hard could it be?

“DING, DING, DING,” the morning bell sounded. The students trudged through the door with their smiles screwed in tightly, some more interested in impressing the teacher than others. A few students already had their binders, mechanical pencils, tab dividers, and note-cards; but most entered the room with nothing.

I peered over the heads of the seventh graders in my first period class while they anxiously awaited my introduction.

“Good morning. My name is Ms. Hampton,” I said. My voice cracked a bit as my heart thudded beneath my newly acquired button up poplin shirt. *Too much starch.*

“Welcome to Language Arts.”

I passed out the syllabus, a classroom rules and procedures sheet, a reading log, and all the paperwork they needed to fill out for the front office (emergency release forms, contact information, etc.).

“We are going to play a little game called Save Fred. Your group is the row that you’re sitting in.”

The whole room sighed.

“Why can’t we pick our own groups?” said a little voice from the back.

“Because the purpose of this assignment is to work together even if you have to work with people you don’t know, because Fred’s life is on the line here,” I answered. I held up Fred – the gummy worm Fred. “You have one paper Dixie cup, two paperclips, and everyone will get a Fred and a Gummy lifesaver. Fred is already under the boat – the cup – and you have to get the lifesaver around Fred...without touching him...and no, you may not stab Fred with the paperclips.”

The students immediately jumped into action trying to figure out how to save Fred. I walked around the room and helped the students when they asked. *This is too easy.*

My second period class progressed in the same fashion. The students were attentive. Second period was my “advanced” class which simply meant that they were reading at or above their grade level. They greeted me as they pranced through the door

and listened when I spoke. Every group saved Fred. I relished in the fact that I was actually getting paid to be here.

I greeted my third period students in the exact manner as I had my previous classes.

“Good morning,” I said to a young boy wearing a Dwayne Wade jersey. I got a nod of recognition. Not exactly what I was hoping for.

All the students filtered into the class and sat down. I pulled out the roll sheet and started calling names.

“Amos, Randall,” I said.

“Here,” said a high-pitched voice from the front row.

“Boyd, James,” I said.

“I go by Brendan,” the scruffy blonde boy with the cerulean eyes said.

“Coffer, how do you say your first name?” I asked.

“Sheeeee...muh,” she responded with a slight roll of the neck.

I looked up at the young girl with the cocoa skin and tightly plaited rows of hair. The hair on the back of my neck stood up.

“Oh...k,” I said giving an identical neck roll. I was not putting up with this attitude, especially not on the first day. I continued calling roll and eventually got to the end. The moment I stopped talking the entire room erupted in conversation. I asked them to settle down, to stop, but they kept on talking. Did I accidentally put on an invisibility cloak, or what?

“Quiet!” My voice bounced off the cinder blocked walls. All eyes darted toward the front of the room. “We are going to play a game called Save Fred.” Chatter ensued and I heard a quiet voice in the back say “Fuck Fred.”

“What did you just say?”

“Nothing.”

Maybe I heard wrong. I explained the game to the students and Fred did not survive. He was subsequently stabbed in the face by paperclips, torn into multiple pieces that would not grow back, and one group decided to take Fred on a trip down one of the group members’ pants.

“DING, DING, DING,” sounded the bell. *Thank God it’s over.* I had fooled myself into thinking that my day was going to be perfect. My day had officially skipped straight to hell.

Fourth period was a blur.

My planning period had arrived. Whoever the genius was that decided a planning period was necessary throughout the day should receive a Congressional Medal of Honor. I needed these fifty-six minutes to get my head straight and chug some much needed caffeine. I had one more period left, but I had been warned that it was my “misfit” class. Administration loved to ramble on about classroom equity and how they try to balance the classes out. Unfortunately, what ends up happening is called *tracking*. A certain group of students had Advanced Math which is only offered once a day, so they have to put them in that class and end up following each other around all day.

I stood at the door shrinking as each student passed by. I was a miniscule speck standing in the door and the kids walked by like I wasn’t even there. I had already gotten

the rundown for this class from my department head. I had a convicted drug dealer, complete with a parole officer that I had to contact weekly, a young girl, no more than fourteen, about six months pregnant and multiple gang members who sat on opposite sides of the room and stared each other down when I wasn't looking. There were also several wannabe gang members and a student that had more facial hair than Grizzly Adams - apparently he had been held back a few times.

I explained the Save Fred game to them in-between outbursts and wads of paper flying across the room. Sixth period had a bit of a different approach than the other classes. They just flat-out refused to play the game. Most of the students just ate Fred and his lifesaver without even attempting the game's objective. Poor Fred.

I made it through the first day physically unscathed. *What the hell have I gotten myself into? Is it too late for me to cut and run? I can't start taking sick days yet.* I walked to my car followed by my fiancé who had also begun his first day teaching special-needs kids at the same school. I climbed into the passenger seat of our truck as he stepped in to the driver side.

"So, how was it?" he asked.

I slowly turned my head and met his brown eyes from across the cab of the truck. I saw myself in the window – hair sticking out all over the place like someone had shuffled a balloon across the top of my head. I even had a pen mark across my neck. "I'm fucked," I replied. "First and second period were fine, and then..." Like poor Fred I was drowning. *I was Fred.*

##

The first few weeks of school, as it turns out, always suck the life out of you. Even when school has just started, the first three-day weekend becomes a necessity just to recover. I had had an entire week of pre-planning, yet still felt completely unprepared. To make matters worse, I had lost my grandmother the week before school started, and working was just the thing to get my mind right. It was possibly the worst thing that had happened to me as an adult and I had convinced myself that starting this job would save me.

“You just have to be a complete bitch the first couple of weeks and then you can ease up on them,” was the advice given to me by more than one veteran teacher.

Really? I have to be a bitch. I know I can do it, of course, but I don't really want the kids to see that side of me. When the bitch comes out to play, children should stay away. These people were veterans though so I had to consider their advice. It was decision time – uber-bitch mode or nurturing I-really-care-about-you mode.

My first period was pretty laid back, no major discipline issues. Sixth period straight up scared the shit out of me and third period just drove me to insanity; but they weren't actual criminals like sixth period. Third period's rap sheet was only school related, not official public record. One student, Michael Sole, was so disrespectful that I didn't even know how to approach him. The word 'ass-hole' just perched itself on my tongue every time I looked at him. And then there was Brendan. I had remembered meeting him at open house the week before. He came up to me and introduced himself as “James, but everyone calls me Brendan.” He said the same thing on the first day. He had one of the most adorable faces I had ever seen and jewel blue eyes the size of quarters. Sorry to say, he also was a little shit. Brendan could pick a scab no bigger than the head

of a pin and mess with it until it bled all over the desk. He could take a pack of colored pencils and, in the middle of a lesson, fling them across the room in such a way that the pencils ended up in every corner. I once caught him in the middle of carving something into my desk with a compass – of course he denied it. And on numerous occasions I caught him staring out the window completely devoid of any thought or emotion.

My background was not in education. I had an English degree, but I knew that something about Brendan wasn't quite right. After several weeks, I had collected no work from him. I asked some of his other teachers if they noticed the same behaviors or if it was just in my class. We came to the consensus that we really needed to monitor Brendan and make sure that there wasn't something else going on. I had made the initial effort to contact his father. Apparently there had been a divorce from his biological mother and his father had remarried and then got divorced again. Tracking down the correct contact information took determination. I did, finally, get a chance to talk to his dad and expressed my concerns. Brendan's dad was very understanding and said that he would talk to him. The path of communication was open. I was assured that this was proper protocol for this sort of thing. Make parent contact and document everything in the event that the student may need additional services in the future. That was the first parent phone call I had made as a middle school teacher. Unfortunately, it wouldn't be my last.

Michael decided to inform the class about how to make a bomb. I was standing in the hallway greeting students as they entered, so I only caught the tail end of the instructions.

“All you need is a little pool shock and brake fluid and then BOOOOM!” I overheard Michael say. I knew what he was talking about – it’s amazing to me that some kids really think teachers are oblivious to the real world. I often think students don’t even realize I am a human being and that they had convinced themselves that I slept on a cot in the back closet. Either way, I knew what Michael was talking about.

“BUZZ, BUZZ, BUZZ,” sounded the call button to the front office.

“I need an administrator,” I said. The color drained from Michael’s face and the entire class couldn’t believe that I had called the office. I had given warnings since the beginning of school and was trying to follow the discipline ladder outlined in the Faculty Handbook. Michael had reached the end of his ladder.

As soon as Ms. Hiller came to the room, I explained what Mr. A-hole was talking about. When the principal entered the room, she pointed at Michael and gestured him into the hallway where the Security Resource Officer was waiting for him. Just as Ms. Hiller was about to leave, a pencil flew across the room and hit another student in the face.

“Brendan!” yelled half the class.

Ms. Hiller spun around, pointed at Brendan, and gestured him to get out into the hallway along with Michael. His entire face went red as he stood up from the desk. He took his walk of shame across the classroom to meet his doom. The rest of the class continued reading *The Outsiders*. Michael didn’t return to class for five days; Brendan, however, came back at the end of class with red eyes and a pout.

We were about six weeks into school and the students were starting their journals. I decided to start them out with something fun and easy and work them towards prompts

of a more abstract nature. Their first journal prompt was, “If I could have a super power, what would it be and why?” One of my sixth-period student responded, “I don’t need no super power, I got me a glock.” Charming. I, of course, had many different responses including, the ability to fly, walk through walls, be invisible, and a host of other supernatural powers. After one week of journaling I collected the students’ responses. To my dismay, Brendan did not turn in a paper.

###

Whatever had possessed me to volunteer to chaperone a school dance, I would never know. I was in charge of supervising the cafeteria, where the kids were dancing. I wouldn’t exactly classify what the kids were doing as dancing - more like dry humping. The kids would make a circle, a very tight circle, so that teachers couldn’t break through – a vicious Red Rover. What happened in the middle of the circle, I really didn’t want to know.

“Ms. Hampton, Ms. Hampton,” I heard from behind me. I spun around to find Sheeeee...Muh, James-but-people-call-me-Brendan, and Nibby from my sixth period class.

“You’re going to learn the Soulja Boy, Ms. Hampton,” Nibby said.

“I’m gonna learn a what?” I said.

“It’s a dance,” said Brendan.

“Okay, show me.”

The group showed me the routine and I picked it up pretty quickly. I didn’t let on that I was familiar with the dance already from teaching high school the previous year, I just let them teach me and before I knew it, I was in the middle of a circle. Jump and

criss-cross your feet, something I didn't quite know with your arms and feet, Superman pose with your arms behind you like you're holding a cape, and then roll to the right and the left, cranking your wrists as if you were revving a motorcycle engine. I probably looked ridiculous, but all my kids were laughing and having fun.

"Alright – Monday morning guys – I will show you my wicked running man," I said before walking out to the hallway to get a drink.

The following Monday I followed through with my promise and demonstrated my amazing dance moves. The running man and the old school Roger Rabbit were a big hit.

"If you guys do well on this test, I will show you the variation on the running man – the side running man," I said. "Where's Brendan?" I asked, looking at the empty first desk in the last row.

"He got in big trouble over the weekend, Ms. Hamp," said one of the students.

"Really? Brendan?" I asked.

"He got picked up on Friday – he was skipping school. The truancy lady saw him walking in town and busted him. I heard he had on black makeup and sh...stuff," Sheeee...Muh replied.

I went to check out the story with the Security Resource Officer. It was close to what the students had described.

"He was crying like a baby, said his dad was going to kill him," said the SRO. "I'm surprised they kept him out of school today." I was surprised as well. I wrote myself a note on my desk calendar to call Brendan's dad during my planning period or after school just to let him know that if I needed to put together some work for Brendan he could just pick it up or I could send it home with a friend.

I sat in the teachers' lounge eating lunch when the guidance counselor came in and asked to speak to me outside. I gathered up my Styrofoam tray filled with the mystery meat of the day and sweet tea filled paper cup and followed Mr. Williams to the benches at the front of the school.

"What's up?" I asked. Usually when the guidance counselor talks to you it has to do with a family member passing away or a divorce. Mr. Williams hung his head and started biting his lower lip.

"Something really bad has happened," he muttered.

"One of mine?" I asked, already knowing the answer.

"Yeah. James Bren..."

"He goes by Brendan," I interrupted.

"He's at Arnold Palmer. His sister found him last night," he said.

"Found him? What do you mean, found him?" I asked.

"He had his karate belt tied around his neck and..."

"Jesus, he tried to commit suicide," I blurted out loud as my tray and cup hit the cement and my hands met my face. My stomach dropped to my toes. If I was still standing at that point it would have been a miracle. I sat down and pulled the old head between the knees to keep from passing out as the stars flitted and danced in front of my eyes. *One of mine. What did I do wrong? What didn't I see?*

"It doesn't look like he's going to make it, but Ms. Hiller and I are going to visit the family tomorrow regardless," said Mr. Williams.

I just sat there. I know there were tears, but they had to disappear because I still had three classes left, one of which was Brendan's class. *Do I say anything to them?* I

picked up my tray and cup from the ground and went back into the teachers' lounge to collect myself. I didn't linger and snuck back to my classroom before the kids could see me in the lunchroom. The last time I had prayed was when my grandmother fell and hit her head and went into the hospital; she never left. I hadn't gone to church in God knows how long. If there really was a God, like I had been taught my entire life in Sunday school and Lutheran Church services, I really needed him to hook me up right now. *Don't take this kid. Don't take one of mine. If I was a bitch the first week of school please let me have one more chance to get it right.* I went through the rest of my day as if nothing had happened. I didn't want to alarm the students. I thought about calling Brendan's dad, but what would say? We had talked before, but what can you say to a father when their son is hooked up to life support?

After I got home I sat outside with my dogs and stared at the sky until it changed from blue to black. There were no stars in the empty Florida sky. I never got another chance to make it right. Brendan died that night. The next day, I would have to tell my kids.

When I arrived at school the next morning the grief counselor was there to help diffuse the situation. *Grief counselor – I don't need a counselor to tell me that I am grieving.* I just went to my office and prepared myself for a grueling and emotionally draining day. I didn't have to say much. The students already knew through the grapevine that Brendan was dead. Some of the students were in shock; some of them didn't really know him. There were a select few that felt responsible.

I told first and second period what I knew and they were all rather despondent; some cried, and a few told me they felt bad for never befriending Brendan. They also let

me know that someone was picking on Brendan on the way home from school. Because they hadn't said anything they now had the letter G emblazoned across their foreheads even though they were not at fault. And then third period rolled around.

All the kids looked up at me not knowing what to say. The unexpected silence filled the classroom for several minutes. I didn't really know what to say either, so I just decided to wing it. These were his classmates, some of whom he did not get along with, and some who never paid him one bit of attention. The only thing I could think of was to just let my heart speak for me and forget the filter between my brain and mouth – just let it out.

“The minute you walk through those doors, you are my kids,” I told them. “If I haven't made that clear to you from day one, then I'm sorry - I should have been a better teacher.” My voice was betraying me. “We already know what happened, but guys what is more important here is *why*?”

The students knew where I was going with my pseudo-speech and I didn't even have to say another word.

“If I haven't said it before I'm gonna say it now – I care about each and every one of you--yes, even you, Michael. You may tick me off to no end, but you're still my kid.” And I lost it. No shame here, I just couldn't hold up the façade any longer. I broke down crying in front of my kids and they couldn't help but do the same. It was on that day that I did the unthinkable and broke one of the cardinal rules of teaching – I hugged my students. I held them in my arms as they cried and I didn't care if I was breaking any rules. A pat on the back just didn't seem to cut it. None of my kids went to see the grief counselor, they stayed with me. We talked about Brendan and how he used to piss us off

and we talked about why it's important to get to know people instead of judging them. The most important thing that we discussed was how crucial it was to tell somebody when you know about or see someone being bullied or being messed with. This went on for a couple of days. All instruction stopped. I may not have been teaching the "standards", but I was still teaching.

By the time the end of the day had come the news of Brendan's death had disseminated throughout the whole school. I walked back to my classroom from the teacher's lounge sporting my puffy eyes and red nose. When I walked into my classroom I had expected to have to settle everyone down and somehow fake my way through teaching a lesson. They were eighth graders and didn't even know Brendan, so this class should be pretty easy. I walked through the doorway and all the kids were sitting in their desks writing. Nibby and two other students were standing at my white board. They had drawn a graffiti wall with 'RIP Brendan' on the board.

"We're real sorry, Ms. Hampton," said several students. "We decided to write sympathy letters to Brendan's parents," said Nibby.

I had thought I was done crying for the day. Hot tears fell once again and as my tears met my cheeks, each student came up to me and hugged me and said they were sorry. I still had an empty desk in my room that would remain empty for the rest of the school year. It was Brendan's desk – with his name carved in it.

It's like I was in middle school all over again - seventh grade to be exact. I danced with Scott to Guns and Roses "November Rain" at our winter dance. He was the only boy who would come near me. I was a little different. Goofy hair, a mouthful of metal, and coke-bottle glasses – what I now call the tri-fecta. Scott saw beyond that. We

were friends; not best friends, but when the news came that he had blown his head off with a shotgun, it didn't really matter anymore. He had gotten into some trouble with the law and apparently felt that the only way out was death. I wished I had known. Maybe there was something I could have said or done that would have stopped him. To this day, I still cannot listen to Eric Clapton's "Tears in Heaven." It was played at Scott's funeral as his friends wept.

The funeral arrangements had been made and all of Brendan's teachers were going to be there. The majority of his classmates were planning to attend as well. I avoided going along on the home visit and came up with some lame excuse. I just couldn't face his parents. Even though I had been assured by colleagues and administrators that I had followed district protocol once I saw that there was an issue in the classroom, I still couldn't get over the possibility that I didn't see what was wrong with this kid. I had to have missed something.

I put on the only black suit I owned; the same one I wore to my grandmother's funeral two months earlier. I thought about burning it afterward; the sad suit had seen too much in its few journeys outside of the closet. My fiancé and I arrived at the funeral home about ten minutes before the service began. Getting out of the car was harder than I thought it would be. I felt like I needed to be there, but wasn't sure if anyone else would feel that way. I just had to suck it up and get out of the car. I owed it to Brendan to be there for him.

As soon as I entered the funeral home, I was met by the tear-stained faces of my students. The room was packed tight and every program and picture had been taken by the mourners. One of my students saw me and rushed over to where I stood.

“I saved one for you, Ms. Hampton,” she said holding out a program with Brendan’s picture inside. “There weren’t a whole lot left and I thought you would want one.”

“Thanks, Brittany,” I said. “Where’s Ms. Jenks?”

“They ran out of seats, so we just lined up against the wall on the left,” she replied.

I followed her in and met up with my faculty members who had very quickly become my friends. Ms. Jenks hadn’t been up to the casket because she didn’t want to go alone; neither did I. We took each other’s hand and moved up the aisle slowly. I could see him from where I stood. He didn’t even look real. He was wearing a blue button-down shirt with some sort of comic book hero on it. His hair had been combed back and spiked – he only wore it like that a few times at school. Usually his hair was a sandy blonde messy mop. The closer I got the louder my heart pounded. I was sure the whole room could hear it, but I couldn’t make it stop. When I leaned over Brendan’s coffin, all I could think to myself was “what had I missed?” Was there any sign that I should have picked up on? Did this little boy know that I cared about him? The fact that I couldn’t answer those questions made me want to take the plastic toy sword sitting next to him and jam it into my torso. I just stood there looking at him and wondering what possibly could have gone so wrong in his short life.

Ms. Jenks and I returned to the sidewall of the funeral room. We saw Brendan’s parents and grandparents, sister and cousins. They were all heartbroken and clutching onto each other as the pastor began his eulogy. I don’t remember the pastor’s name, what

he looked like, what church he belonged to, or what he wore. I didn't want to remember. I just wanted this day to be over.

Brendan and I had first met at open house no more than six weeks before. We hadn't even begun to learn much and even the little bit that we had learned Brendan had tuned me out completely. He hadn't been interested in class discussion, reading stories, writing journals, or anything else we had done in class. Maybe it was just me.

"Looking through some of Brendan's class work, we found a journal entry entitled – 'If I could have a super power, what would it be and why?' the pastor stated.

What? He'd actually answered a journal prompt. *I don't believe it.* I had been able to keep myself together pretty well until that moment. I lost it. I think I actually let out an audible sob. My students standing around me knew why I was crying and they surrounded me creating a superhero-like wall of protection; an invisible barrier to keep out the rest of world.

"It's okay, Ms. Hampton, it's gonna be all right," one of them said.

As I clenched my tissues of grief I realized that I had missed it. The one piece of class work that Brendan completed in the entire six weeks of school and I missed it. Brendan wanted to fly. He wanted to soar above the trees and feel the wind in his hair. I just wanted to go back in time.

Returning to school the next day felt wrong. The world would go on as though Brendan had never existed. Students would think about him every once in a while and when they flipped to the tribute page in the yearbook, but nothing would really change for them. Little had I known that Brendan, in just the six short weeks that I had known him, would completely change my life. I would make damn sure that what I hadn't done

for Brendan I would do for every other student that walked through my door. I vowed to make sure that every student that entered my room would know they were one of mine.

“Now that we have all of the procedures and rules stuff out of the way, today I am going to do a little storytelling,” I said to the bright eyes of my seventh graders.

“What kind of story,” several students asked.

“Well, I’ll let you decide what kind of story it is. It’s about one of my former students. His name was James, but everyone called him Brendan. I met Brendan the first year I taught middle school in Florida.” I pulled up my black leather rolling chair and wheeled in as close as I could get. I told them exactly what had happened to Brendan.

“Mrs. Rau, why didn’t anyone say something about him being picked on?” one of my new students asked.

“It’s Lane, right? Well, I don’t know. What I do know is that I want you guys to promise me not to allow anything like this to happen to you or to someone you know. If you see something or hear someone being bullied – say something. I know we just met two days ago, but you can come to me or any other teacher and we will listen. We’re in this together. So, what kind of super powers are we looking at here?”

“I want to walk through walls.”

“I want to be invisible.”

“I want super strength.”

“I want to fly.”

A little knot caught in my throat and I bit down on my bottom lip to stop the tears from flowing.

“What super-power would you want, Mrs. Rau?”

I thought about it for a second. “I want to travel through time like Doc Brown in *Back to the Future*.”

“What is that?” Lane asked.

“You’ve never seen *Back to the Future*? Homework – this weekend – see all three *Back to the Futures*. How about like Hermione and Harry Potter in *The Prisoner of Azkaban* with the Time Turner?” All the students nodded.

I thought about it more after the class left the room. If I could travel through time I would be able to save Scott and maybe catch my grandma before she fell. More than anything, I’d like just one more class with Brendan.

Playing Moses

The Vitalis mixed with the pungent odor of Old Spice created the distinct smell of my Grandpa. I hadn't gotten the full whiff today because Grandpa was busy in the yard with my sister, Heather. The apartment Grandma and Grandpa lived in had a nice yard for us to play in with swings and hollowed out tractor tires. It was conveniently located right outside the balcony's sliding door so we couldn't get into too much mischief.

"Heather, it's not hard at all," Grandpa said.

"But, Grandpa, I fall over every time," Heather replied.

I watched my sister attempt several cartwheels and fall on her face, just like she said she would. I propped my Rainbow-Brite doll on the cement step and jumped off the stairwell when I heard Heather crying. As I got closer she was clutching her knee. She had landed on a sharp stone in the yard and blood had started to seep out. Her brown hair stuck to her face only in the spots where tears fell. Grandpa knelt down and pulled out his hanky or snot rag, as he referred to it, dabbed some of the dirt off her round face and laid it over Heather's knee.

"Hold this, Jenny," Grandpa said. He handed me his Bass Pro Shops trucker cap and I put it on my head. Grandpa ran a hand through his freshly greased more-salt- than-pepper hair and wiped the left over goop from the supposedly non-greasy hair tonic on his pants. He walked to the far left of the play yard only to stop, take off his button-up brown sweater, toss it over the railing, and prop his Coke-bottle-sized brown glasses on the step next to Rainbow Brite.

“Watch and learn, girls. Pay close attention to form here,” Grandpa said. Before we could look away, Grandpa was flipping cartwheel after cartwheel, one after the other in perfect form, his legs outstretched like a veteran circus performer.

Heather and I looked at each other with our mouths open as an out of breath Grandpa walked over to us sitting in the grass. I had a smile from ear to ear and Heather had a new found determination to do the perfect cartwheel. Grandpa clapped his hands together twice and reached down to help us up.

“Alright, if a seventy-six-year-old fogey can do it, just think how easy this is for a nine-year-old,” Grandpa said. Heather got up and went to the far end of the yard as I hopped into Grandpa’s arms to watch. I took the hat off my head and put it back on Grandpa - only sideways.

“Hey, silly,” he said. He waved his hand in front of my face and pulled out a fifty-cent piece from behind my ear. I gave him a big kiss on his cheek and took in the Old Spice and Vitalis smell, now mingled with sweat. He messed up my Dorothy Hamill haircut and plucked a dandelion from the lawn, sticking it behind my ear.

“My little weed princess,” he said.

“Hey, I’m not a weed,” I said.

Heather didn’t do the perfect cartwheel that day, but Grandpa stayed outside with her until the mosquitoes came out, with me as their personal cheering section.

Thanksgiving dinner at Grandma and Grandpa’s was always something to behold. There were at least eight people, ten, if you included the two dogs. It was a little crowded, but somehow we always managed to squeeze everyone in. I always got stuck sitting at the kids table with Heather.

“Do I have to sit at the kiddies table again, Uncle Dale?” I asked.

“When you grow tall enough to see over the table, then you can sit with the grownups,” Uncle Dale said.

“Is that a no?” I asked.

“That’s a no,” he said with a smile and a puff of his pipe, before making his way over to the wood burner to toss another log onto the fire. I made my way into the kitchen to spy on Thanksgiving dinner. Grandma was putting the final touch on the mashed potatoes and Aunt Geri had just lit the candles on the grown up table.

“Grandma, where’s Grandpa?” I asked.

“He’s out behind the shed - not smoking,” Grandma said.

“Grandpa doesn’t smoke,” I said.

Grandpa came in the front door, shook the snow off his hat, and brushed off his sweater.

“It’s a cold one out there,” Grandpa said. He opened the oven door to have a look at the turkey. “Turkey’s done.”

I ran over to peek into the oven. “But the popper thing isn’t up yet.”

“Doesn’t matter, it’s done. Take a whiff, it smells done,” Grandpa said.

I took in the smell of the cooked turkey, like Grandpa said, but I had no idea what the difference in smell between a cooked turkey and a not cooked turkey was.

Grandma took the turkey out of the oven with her hand-made pot holders, courtesy of Mrs. Dopp’s craft day at school, and sliced into it. Lo and behold, it was done.

Every weekend was the same routine for us. Drive to Grandma and Grandpa's, stay for the weekend and then drive home. There's fifty-two weeks in a year, multiplied by two days a week, which means we were up north for one hundred and four days out of the year. And that's not including holidays. Even though we were a close family, sleeping on the floor was never an exciting time, except when Grandpa would build us a fort. Mom and Dad had finally saved enough money to buy a small cottage on Southerland Lake in northern Michigan, only 30 minutes from Grandma, Grandpa, Aunt Geri and Uncle Dale. We had to turn off onto this dirt road that had more potholes in it than I-75 in downtown Detroit. My parents' brown Bonneville station wagon, with the caved-in left passenger door barely kept its bolts intact as we approached yet another gravel driveway. Dad put the car in park and Mom and Heather got out of the car to explore our new weekend getaway.

"It's kinda small, Mom," Heather said.

"What's that?" I stuck out my finger at the brown shed sitting out in front of the yellow rectangular house.

"That's the outhouse," Dad said. He motioned us in its direction and swung the door open.

"Ewww," I said. The flies and stink made my sister and I put a hand to our face.

"Cindy," Dad yelled, "looks like this needs a bit of cleaning." Dad shut the door to the outhouse with the sad excuse for a toilet seat that was really just a hole cut out of a piece of plywood.

I walked past the car and set my eyes on a rusted out water pump. Immediately, I ran over to it and started pulling up and down on the lever.

“Jenny, get away from that thing. I need to look at it first before you start playing with it,” Dad said.

I stepped away from the water pump and fixed my attention on the row of steps descending down to a little sand patch meeting the lake. The sun was just starting to set as I locked eyes with the willow tree. Leaving Mom, Dad and Heather behind, I bolted down the sloped terrain towards the swinging branches of the tree. It had four enormous columns sprouting from its base that left a little Jenny-sized seat right in the middle. My exploration was interrupted by the sound of a honking horn and I ran back up to the house.

“Grandpa,” I yelled. I ran past my Grandma, Aunt Geri and Uncle Dale, to meet my Grandpa in his usual button-up sweater and today, a UAW hat. He scooped me up as I jumped into his arms.

“Hey, kiddo,” he said. “What do ya think?”

“We haven’t gone inside yet,” I said. He put me down and I took him by the hand, leading him over to the door. I unhooked the latch and pushed my way in. There was just a single room with no separate bedroom, no bathroom, no electricity, and, until further notice, no running water. It smelled like a moth balls. The carpet was a brown and orange stripe that, at one time or another, really tied the room together. The previous owners were kind enough to leave behind a blue convertible sofa and a brown lounge chair. Heather, Mom, Dad, Grandma, Uncle Dale and Aunt Geri were all waiting for me and Grandpa to enter so they could get a peek at the lone room. I walked over to the

window and caught a glimpse of the lake. The cottage was built into a steep hill that emptied out at what should be a beach, but was just a patch of dirt.

Everyone was up in the one-room cottage that I was supposed to be excited about. I had snuck away from all the hoop-la and climbed into my little seat in the middle of the willow tree. Without warning, Grandpa popped up in between the tree limbs and scared the bejesus out of me.

“What are you doing out here? The skeeters are going to eat you alive,” he said.

“Mom bug sprayed me,” I said.

“Come on out of there,” he said. I reached out for his hand and hopped onto the sand.

“The boat’s gonna be here next weekend,” he said.

“A boat?” I said.

“Yeah, a boat. You can’t have a cottage on a lake without a boat,” he said.

“I don’t know how to swim,” I said.

“Nothing to it. You just go like this.” He started doing the air back stroke which then turned into the air breast stroke and finally the doggy paddle, which made me laugh. I picked up a rock on the shoreline and threw it as far as I could.

“What was that?” he asked.

“What?”

“You can’t just pick up a rock and throw it in the water like that,” he said. I looked at him like he was a space alien with tentacles. “Oh my, looks like I have something else to teach you.”

Grandpa scaled the sand for rock after rock. As soon as I understood what he was doing, I gathered up a pile of my own.

“I am going to teach you the art of stone skipping,” he said. “I taught your Grandma how to do this and now she’s even better than I am. Now, the key to this is form. You stand like this.” He stood sideways and I followed suit. “Take the rock with the flat-side-up and then, toss.” He didn’t toss the rock this time. “Make sure that you flick your wrist. Like this.” He demonstrated the proper wrist-flicking technique along with a goofy face. “Give it a go.”

“But Grandpa, I won’t be able to see it,” I said.

“You’ll see it, but more importantly, you’ll hear it,” he said.

I turned sideways with the flat rock in my hand. Letting out a deep breath, I chucked the rock and made sure to flick my wrist at the correct time. Lo and behold, Grandpa was right. Whisk, whisk, whisk, whisk, whisk, sploosh went my little rock.

“See, five skips on the first one. I don’t think I can best that,” he said. Grandpa took his stance and settled himself into the sand and let the rock fly. Sploosh went his rock into the lake.

“I win,” I said.

“It’s this old back of mine,” he said. “Hop on.”

I hopped on his back and he carried me up the steps back to the cottage.

We would have had movie night at the cottage, but no electricity - equals no television. I begged Dad to take us back to Grandma and Grandpa’s. When we got there, I made my grand entrance in my mom’s silk blue nighty and my homemade princess headband. Heather and I alternated movie choices from week to week. She always

picked some stupid movie like Bedknobs and Broomsticks or Mary Poppins. I tended to switch between The Ten Commandments and The Wizard of Oz. My Uncle Dale followed me into the living room wearing a sheet, trying to look like Moses. Grandpa was Ramses and I was Princess Nefritiri. Grandpa always played Moses, and he did a really great 'let my people go.' For some reason he wanted my Uncle Dale to do it this time. It was fine with me because my Grandpa did a pretty good Ramses, too.

"Do you hear it, Memnet? The whole city calls his name," I said in my best throne princess voice.

"So let it be written, so let it be done," Grandpa said. He was doing a really good Ramses impersonation tonight.

"Let my people go," said Uncle Dale. Our audience members, Mom, Dad, Heather, Aunt Geri and Grandma, all began chanting "Moses."

We finished our performance to applause from the crowd. Even if we were horrible, they were required by some silent law to applaud and cheer anyway. Uncle Dale picked me up and flung me over his shoulder.

"You better go get in your jammies," he said.

"Okay," I said. He put me down, messed my hair and I ran back to my room.

We visited the cottage almost every weekend, except for when Heather had a basketball game or if I had roller skating on the weekend. Usually on Fridays I had to stay after school and wait for Heather to finish up with practice. I would always sit outside the gym and watch for Mom and Dad's car to pull up. It was 3:30 and I still had at least an hour until we could head up north. I was drawing on the inside of my science

book and I saw Mom walking up to the school. It was only 3:45. I got up off the floor and swung my bag over my shoulder.

“Hey, baby,” Mom said. “We need to get your sister.”

“Are we going up north early?” I asked.

“No, sweetie.” Mom had a tissue in her hand and wiped her nose, making it turn a little redder. We walked in the gymnasium and Mom went over to the basketball coach as I stood by the door. Heather threw a basketball up at the hoop, missed, and then made her way over to the coach.

“Go get your stuff, Heather,” I overheard Mom say. Heather didn’t even have a chance to change. She came out of the locker room in her bright blue St. Peter gym shorts and t-shirt and we made our way out to the car.

Dad was in the driver seat waiting for us as Heather and I climbed into the back seat with our book bags. Dad pulled the car into a parking space and jolted us into park. Mom turned around and looked at us. She was crying.

“Girls, your Grandma called me this morning from the hospital,” Mom said. She put her hand up to her mouth and then wiped her eyes with the tissue. “She found Grandpa this morning and he wasn’t breathing.”

Heather looked over at me and then back at Mom. “Are we going to see Grandpa in the hospital?” Heather asked.

“No, sweetie. Grandpa died. By the time Grandma found him he was already in Heaven,” Mom said.

Heather started to cry and covered her mouth with her hand. Mom did the same and Dad was still holding onto the steering wheel. I sat there with my feet hanging over the seat in my yellow shorts, staring at the back of the brown seat.

*

I had never been to a funeral before. Mom had put me in a black dress with white lace on the collar that tickled the back of my neck. My Dad held my hand as we walked up to the casket that held my Grandpa. Aunt Geri, Uncle Dale and Grandma were all there waiting for us.

“Do you want to see, Jenny?” Uncle Dale asked. He knelt down and took both my hands. “You don’t have to.”

“Okay,” I said. Uncle Dale picked me up and walked over to the casket, standing me on top of the little stool. I reached out a finger and touched Grandpa’s hand folded across his chest. It felt like an ice cube.

“Why don’t you give him this?” Uncle Dale said. He held out a fifty-cent piece and put it in the palm of my hand. I looked at the picture on the back of the coin and with the face up; I put it underneath my Grandpa’s thumb.

“Good girl,” Uncle Dale said as he kissed the top of my head. I stood on my tip toes and brushed a faint kiss across my Grandpa’s cold, stiff forehead. As I walked away one of my cousins started to sing the “Lord’s Prayer.”

I sat in the kid’s room at the funeral home playing with a magnetic block that had little metal diamonds all over it and reading an October edition of Highlights magazine for the rest of the funeral.

Grandpa was laid to rest in the White Chapel cemetery just outside of Detroit, Michigan. My other Grandma and Grandpa, my Dad's mom and dad, took me back to their house while I waited for my parents and Heather.

*

Heather and I got stuck with the kids' table, again. We had Thanksgiving at the cottage this year. My Dad had spent the summer fixing the place up and we finally had electricity. My Dad, otherwise known as Handyman Hal, rigged something up so I could watch my movies, and even put in a new dock for the orange metal flake boat that didn't go quite as fast as he'd like. Uncle Dale bought a blue paddle boat for all of us to go around the lake in, and occasionally get stuck in the lily pads. Everything was ready for dinner, except the turkey. Grandma didn't want to take any chances, so we waited for the popper thing this year. Uncle Dale was doing his best to take over Grandpa's usual duties.

"Let's say grace," Uncle Dale said. We all bowed our heads and folded our hands in front of us. "Dear Heavenly Father, we thank you for this day and for your many blessings, and we ask that you bless this food to the nourishment of our bodies and watch over our loved ones. In Jesus name, Amen."

"Amen," we all repeated.

Uncle Dale carved the turkey and we ate our Thanksgiving meal in silence.

Mom, Grandma, and Aunt Geri cleared the dishes and Uncle Dale and Dad went down to the dock to work on the boat. Uncle Dale had his tools spread out across the dock and Dad had his head buried in the boat engine.

"What're you doing, Uncle Dale?" I asked.

“We’re just giving the boat a little extra juice, but don’t tell your Mom,” Uncle Dale said with a wink. “Why don’t you and Heather go play some badminton?”

“Okie, dokie,” I said. I found Heather in the cottage and we played badminton while Dad and Uncle Dale revved the boat engine repeatedly until the sun went down. When the neighbors started to complain about the noise, my Dad and Uncle Dale retired back into the cottage.

“Let’s watch a movie,” I said to my Uncle Dale, who was sitting in the dusty pink Lazy Boy recliner with his pipe stuffed full of cherry tobacco. I loved that smell.

“What do you want to watch? Or do I even need to ask?” he replied. He cracked a smile, making the salt and pepper of his moustache more apparent.

“Guess?” I asked.

“The Wizard of Oz?”

“Nope,” I said.

“Sleeping Beauty?”

“Really, really cold,” I said. I hopped into his lap with my VHS tape in tow.

“Jenny, I really like the movie, but not again,” he said.

“Uncle Dale,” I said. “Pleeeeeease, pretty please, with sugar on top, can we watch *The Ten Commandments*? Grandpa always watched it with me.” I put on the sad face complete with brown puppy dog eyes and my patented bottom lip-that’ll-make-you-trip sized pout with my hands clasped together as if in prayer.

“Okay,” he replied. “Go ahead and put it in...again.”

I hopped off his lap, turned on the dark-cherry console television, flipped the power button on the VCR and stuck the tape in. Roll beginning credits: *Cecil B.*

Demille's – The Ten Commandments. Heaven. I sat back in the chair with my uncle, hugging my knees into my chest. Thumb, index finger, middle finger, ring finger, pinkie. Uncle Dale had his fingers attached to my knee cap and without warning, attacked. I catapulted off the chair trying to escape my uncle's knee tickle. Basking in my covert escape, my uncle found his way back to the chair. I hopped back into his lap.

“Again, please,” I said. Thumb, index finger, middle finger, ring finger, pinkie.

The next day, Mom, Aunt Geri, and Grandma went to some arts and crafts thing in town, while the men and us kids had some fun in the boat. Dad had pulled my life jacket straps so tight around me that my head felt like it was being squeezed. Heather knew how to swim better than me so she just had to be belted into the seat. The boat had gone through its final refurbishment and Uncle Dale was ready to test it out with my Dad. He was standing on the dock with his slalom ski waiting for Uncle Dale to gun it so he could pull him off the dock and land upright in the water. I was a prisoner, unable to move, belted into the seat next to Uncle Dale.

“Ready, Hal?” Uncle Dale yelled. My Dad gave him a wave, quickly put a hand through his black hair and held onto the rope as tight as he could.

“Hold on, girls,” Uncle Dale said. He pushed the throttle forward just enough to take the boat out of idle and then pushed it all the way down as far as it would go.

The rope began to unravel from the dock the farther we got away. I managed to twist around just in time to see my Dad ripped from the end of the dock and splash into the water.

“Did he make it?” Uncle Dale asked.

“I don’t know, all I see is water spray,” I said. I kept looking and finally saw the top of my Dad’s black hair pop up through the water.

“He’s up,” I yelled. Heather and I did a victory cheer and gave each other a high five. Uncle Dale took the boat with my Dad behind it around the lake once and dropped Dad off by the shore. Heather and I tossed the buoys out over the side as we glided up to the dock.

“Alright Hal,” Uncle Dale said. He helped Dad out of the water and reached down to grab his water ski.

“Whoo,” Dad said. “Awesome.”

“Wanna go again?” Uncle Dale said.

“Hell, no. We had to practice that a dozen times to get it right once. That’s enough for me for one day,” Dad said.

“Next weekend then. Hey girls, how about some ice cream?” Uncle Dale asked.

“Black Cherry,” I said.

“I want Superman ice cream,” Heather said.

“Okay, okay, go change out of your bathing suits and we’ll go,” Uncle Dale said.

*

I hopped out of the station wagon to go grab my tape player. Listening to Dad’s horrible blues music for three hours was unbearable. Just as I was ready to run back out the door, the phone rang. I should have just ignored it, but it was right by the door.

“Hello?” I said.

“Jenny?”

“Yeah, is this Aunt Geri?” I asked.

“Yeah, get your Mom, hon,” she said.

“We were just getting ready to leave,” I said.

“No, honey. Go get your Mom, right now,” Aunt Geri said.

I went out to the car and motioned for Mom to roll the window down.

“Aunt Geri’s on the phone. She said she has to talk to you,” I said. Mom looked over at Dad and then got out of the car. I followed Mom back into the house. She picked up the receiver and I headed back to my room where I could eavesdrop on the conversation. I very quietly picked up the phone on my bedside table, careful not to make even a single sound.

“We just got the test back, and it’s what they thought,” I heard Aunt Geri say.

“Oh, sis, no. How long?” Mom asked. There was a long silence on the phone and I could hear my Aunt Geri crying.

“Weeks, a few months, if he’s lucky. Cindy, he’s only fifty-six. It’s not supposed to happen like this,” Aunt Geri said.

I hung up the phone as tears started to fill up my eyes. I walked back into the kitchen where Mom was standing next to the phone with her forehead against the wall. She saw me standing there with tears on my face.

“I heard,” I said.

“Oh, Jenny,” Mom said. She walked over to me and put her arms around me, holding me as tight as she could. I cried into her shoulder for what seemed like forever. I opened my eyes to see Dad and Heather standing in the doorway.

“Cindy?” Dad said. Mom turned around to see them with a red face.

“It’s Dale,” Mom said.

*

I had never seen my Dad cry before. My Mom, Dad, Heather, Aunt Geri, Grandma, and I all stood before Uncle Dale's casket and openly, for the world to see, sobbed. He was almost unrecognizable. His face was gray and the funeral home did something really stupid to his hair. *Uncle Dale did not wear his hair like that.* His cheeks were sunken in and his blue suit swallowed him whole. He lasted for three months without chemotherapy or medication. Even in his final days, he spared us having to sit in hospitals.

"What's the point of prolonging the inevitable?" he said.

It was by far the worst day in the history of my family. We were all so shocked that it was almost as if we really weren't at a funeral. *Maybe if I shut my eyes and open them really quick it will all just turn off, like a bad movie.* My cousin, the cousin who sang at every family function, couldn't even bring himself to sing this time around. Even the minister giving the eulogy started tearing up.

The final moments at the funeral home came and my family followed the casket out to the hearse to go to the gravesite. I walked along with my Grandma behind my Aunt Geri and my parents. Heather was somewhere in the mix of people.

"Oh, Jenny," Grandma said. Her legs started to wobble and her eyes rolled up in the back of her head.

"Dad," I yelled. He turned around in time to catch my Grandma from falling on the concrete. Everyone started to gather around her. My Mom came running over with some water and started shaking her.

“Mom. Mom, wake up,” she said. My Mom started crying. “Mom, wake up, please.” She shook her some more. Grandma faintly started to blink her eyes.

“She’s okay,” my Dad said to everyone standing around.

“He’s just too young, it should be me in there,” Grandma said. My Grandma pulled me in close to her and hugged my Mom while sitting on the concrete outside the funeral home.

My Uncle Dale was laid to rest in a quiet out-of-the- way cemetery in Gladwin, Michigan. My whole family watched as he was lowered into the ground. Aunt Geri, in her long black dress, put the first bit of dirt on his casket, followed by my Grandma. I waited until it was my turn and knelt down to pick up a small mound of dirt. It was dark and moist between my fingers as I looked down at my Uncle’s permanent home. I tossed a handful of dirt into the cavernous hole.

Fiction

Letters from Santa Claus

May stretched out her hand to turn the knob on the side door. She glanced through the small curtained window and found Tommy sitting at the wooden kitchen table, swinging his legs back and forth. His feet did not touch the ground, and his chin barely made it over the edge of the table. The pencil in his hand was thicker than any of his fingers and produced a monotonous sound as he tapped the end of the lead on the table. He bit down on his bottom lip, leaned as far forward as he could, and wrote something on the plain white paper. The paper was still too far away so Tommy sat himself on his haunches and hovered over the paper.

“Hey, kiddo,” she said, tousling his black hair. “What are you working on?” She pulled up a chair next to him and sat down slowly into the seat.

“Nothing,” Tommy quickly responded.

“Are you sure it’s nothing? It looks pretty important to me,” said May. She peeked over at the first few words on the paper. “Dear Santa.” She gave Tommy a wink and he looked down at the table with a bit of a frown. “It’s okay, hon. I just thought July was a little early to be writing for Christmas.”

“Santa gets pretty busy though, so I thought I’d write early this year,” Tommy replied.

“You wrote to him last year?”

“Yeah, but he never wrote back.”

“Well, I should probably write him, too,” said May as she rubbed her stomach.

“What do you think, Tommy? A rocking horse or a buggy?”

Tommy smiled widely showing that a few of his bottom teeth were missing. “I can ask for you. Santa won’t mind if we just send one letter.”

“Maybe you should ask for a new apron for your Aunt May. This one has about split at the seams. My big ol’ fat belly,” at which Tommy let out a loud laugh. When May and Billy announced to his family that she was expecting, Tommy didn’t quite understand why he would be called uncle. May argued with Tommy for at least an hour trying to explain that she wasn’t his aunt. Finally, May just gave in.

“Fine! Just call me Aunt May then, even though I can’t be your aunt and your sister-in-law at the same time!” she exclaimed. She threw her hands in the air and Tommy laughed at her.

“You sure are taking this uncle thing serious, Tommy,” May said. “Well, I have to go help your brother. You get cracking on that letter - the sooner the better.” She got up from the chair and messed up Tommy’s hair one more time. He continued writing and pressed the lead so hard onto the paper that it probably made an indentation in the wooden table.

The little white shed behind the house usually smelled so bad it was hard to stay out there for longer than a few minutes. Regardless, May helped Billy with the fish which were their only source of income. As the fish made their way to May’s cutting board, the process began – crinkle up nose, turn head, and start cutting.

“This is disgusting,” said May.

“Well, it may be, but it’s something to get some money together so we can get out of here,” commented Billy. He, on the other hand, scooped up the fish and sliced it up quickly without flinching.

“I know you’re tired of living with your parents, but they didn’t just kick you out on the street, which is more than I can say for my family,” she said. “Plus, I kind of like being around Tommy; he’s sweet.”

May put her filet knife on the cutting board and swept away her black hair from her brow with her forearm, making sure not to get any fish gut remnants on her face. She glanced up at the overcast sky, a regular occurrence in Michigan. After an hour or so of splitting little fish bodies and deboning eight-inch perch and blue gill, May put the knife down and wiped her hands on her apron.

“I gotta go inside. I’m gonna be sick.” May washed her hands in the cast iron sink in the shed and went back into the house.

After drying her hands off, May rifled through the roll top desk in her bedroom looking for paper and pencil. Somehow, while scraping out the insides of the fish, May had found some inspiration. When Tommy was at school, she would sneak out to the mailbox and take the letter he had written to Santa Claus and reply to it. May even tried to draw a phony green and red postmark that looked like a Christmas wreath with the North Pole emblazoned in the middle.

May practiced her hand at calligraphy and very quickly found out that it was more difficult than she had thought. Piece after piece of paper with squiggly J’s and fancy T’s littered the small rolltop oak desk that sat next to her and Billy’s hand-me-down brass bed.

“What exactly are you doing?” Billy asked. He stood in the doorway with his hands on his hips, looking at May pouring over the stack of paper.

“I told you – it’s a secret. It’s something for your little brother and that’s all I’m gonna say,” she replied. May immediately returned to her scripting. She leaned forward and let out a small sigh as she rubbed her lower back. Her pregnant belly was in the way of getting her any closer to the desk.

“I see how it is. Won’t even tell your husband what you’re up to?” he said.

“You’ll find out soon enough. Besides, you can’t keep a secret,” she responded, pointing to her pregnant belly. “This was supposed to be a secret. I could have hid it, but no. You had to go blabbing your mouth to your mom and dad.”

Billy threw his hands up in the air. “I give up. You wanted away from your Pa and you’re away. Trust me, I wasn’t looking for this to happen either, but here we are.”

“Just stop,” May said quietly putting her hand up. “You’ll find out soon enough. Just let me do this.” May continued working on the letter and Billy left the room pouting.

May delicately constructed her letter to Tommy. All of her practice came down to the ecru-colored vellum paper with the frayed edges. There was no room for error. The paper cost half a day’s worth of filleted fish. Billy would be furious if he found out how much she had paid. Not to mention, if she messed up this time it would be another trip into town, and the idea of waddling all the way there and back was not something that appealed to her.

Trying to write as if she were an elderly fat man who only came around once a year was more difficult than she thought, but she was determined to pull off this ruse.

Dear Tommy,

You have an awfully big list this year young man. I can't help but wonder if you have included anything for yourself. You are far too old to be in use of a buggy and a silver rattle. It is very kind of you to be so thoughtful of those around you. I'm sure your parents would be very proud of you and your nephew or niece will be very lucky to have you as their uncle. The buggy and silver rattle will be delivered on December 24, 1930.

I also ask that you write me again with a list of presents that you would like. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Saint Nicholas Claus

May accentuated the N and the S just to dress the letter up a little bit more. Luckily, she knew that the buggy and silver rattle were already taken care of by her in-laws. They had been very kind to her. Even though she and Billy had been married only a few months, and that was only because she was pregnant, they had accepted her as part of their family. Dorothy and William, Sr. had even let her and Billy stay in their house until the younger couple could afford a place of their own. May never really understood why they were so nice to her, but a part of her wanted to believe that they understood or maybe they had even gone through this when they were younger. Unlike May's father and step-mother, William and Dorothy Cannon did not judge. Dorothy would even say outlandish things out of ear-shot from William, Sr. May had even interrupted Dorothy doing something she described as "womanly maintenance." All May saw was a hot water bottle and a piece of tubing, but Dorothy insisted it was no big deal. Dorothy told May she would have to get one of the contraptions for herself unless she wanted to be

pregnant every year. Even though May couldn't put it into words, she was grateful and would never think of questioning or hindering her relationship with Billy's parents.

May neatly folded the letter and slid it gently into the envelope. She had already drawn the faux postmark, addressed the letter, and all that was left was the seal. May went to the dime store in hopes of finding an old wax seal. Though no one used them much anymore, occasionally she would see them on official correspondence. The dime store didn't have one, and the ladies that worked there had no idea where to look. May went to every single store in downtown Ferndale, Michigan. By the time she got home, her feet were swollen to twice their normal size. She had, however, found what she was looking for. The last place she stopped, King Books, on the corner of Woodward Avenue, had a stationary section, and along with it, old-world-style wax seals.

May lit the candle on the desk and held the wax stick over the flame for a few seconds. The wax dripped onto the flap of the envelope and May pressed in the intricate C. It was perfect. Tommy would have no reason to believe that this was anything other than an authentic letter directly from the North Pole.

May figured that waiting a couple of weeks would douse any suspicion from Tommy. She walked out to the mailbox before Tommy got home from school. She had to hurry because he would be getting home soon. Just as she placed the letter in the mailbox, Tommy came into view down the street. He saw his Aunt May standing outside the white brick house and hopped into a run.

"Aunt May, Aunt May," he yelled from down the street.

"What, Tommy?" she said with her hand on her brow blocking out the sun.

"I learned Q today," he said. "It looks like the number two."

“I know. Pretty neat, huh? You’re cursive will look better than mine soon, kid,” she replied.

Tommy stopped at the mailbox and opened it up as usual. There were some letters for his parents and at the bottom of the stack was the letter from Santa Claus. He didn’t even notice it. He just grabbed the clump of mail and continued towards the house. May walked with him once he caught up to her and couldn’t help but smile a little bit to herself as the gravel crunched beneath her feet. They entered the house and Tommy tossed the stack of mail onto the side table.

“Are you hungry?” May asked.

“Nope.”

May closed the lid to the icebox.

“Well, let me see if we got any mail today.” May flipped through the pile and plucked out the letter.

“Here’s one for you, Tommy,” she said nonchalantly.

Tommy’s head snapped back to look at May holding the letter out. He reached out, took the letter from May, and burst into a grin wide enough to see his molars. Tommy jumped up and down, smashing the soles of his Buster Browns into the wood floor.

“Oh my gosh, oh my gosh, oh my gosh,” Tommy sputtered. He held the letter out and looked it over from front to back and ran his fingers over the wax seal on the back.

May winced a little when he tore into the envelope. “Well, I guess it’s something important, huh?” she asked. May eased herself down on the flowery sofa and propped her feet up on a pillow.

“I don’t believe it,” he said. “I didn’t think he would write back; he never has before.”

“Who?” May asked.

“Santa,” he said in little more than a whisper. He unfolded the letter and read it to himself, mouthing the words from time to time.

“Aren’t you going to let me read it, Tommy?” asked May.

“Well, it’s kind of a secret. I don’t want anyone to know because it might spoil the surprise. Promise you won’t tell anyone,” he pleaded.

“Oh, I think we can keep this between you and me,” she said.

Tommy smiled giddily and then grabbed his school bag from the table.

“Where are you going?” asked May.

“I have to write back.”

May watched in dismay as Tommy sprinted down the hallway to his room.

Tommy wrote his letter to Santa Claus, and May responded. May had convinced Tommy that it was Santa Claus writing the letters. She, once again, waited on the gravel driveway outside of the white brick house for Tommy to come home to a surprise in the mailbox.

“What did you learn today, kiddo?” she asked while Tommy flipped through the mail.

“Another one!” he shouted.

Tommy kept on walking towards the house, and May stopped in the middle of the driveway.

“Tommy?” May said frozen still.

May looked at Tommy as his eyes dropped to the ground. His school bag, lunch pail, and the mail followed.

“Do I need to get Billy?” he asked.

“Nobody’s home. I need you to run and get Dr. Freeland. He lives over on Robert Street,” May instructed. She was standing in a shallow puddle of water and her ankle-length paisley skirt was soaked through. It was time. Tommy didn’t mutter a word and raced down the driveway to the street.

May managed to make her way into the house, but she didn’t make it very far. She dropped to her knees just inside of the doorway. The floor was not the most desirable place to have a baby, but it would have to do. She stayed on the floor for what seemed like forever until Dr. Freeland and Tommy came running up the pathway leading to the house. They got her up and into the bedroom.

Several hours later, and with his parents now home, Tommy sat in the living room hugging his knees to his chest. Every time his Aunt May screamed he tensed up and buried his face in his knees trying to hold back his tears. His brother Billy told him that it was normal and for him not to worry, but it sounded just awful. Before long, May’s screaming stopped, and the soft wails of a newborn baby began. Tommy jumped up from the sofa and waited outside the bedroom door with his parents.

Billy slowly opened the door, and wrapped up in a red-and-white crocheted blanket was Tommy’s nephew.

“It’s a boy, kid,” said Billy to Tommy. He knelt down in order for Tommy to get a good look at his shiny new toy.

“Can I touch him?” he asked.

“Sure.”

Tommy reached out his thin little hand and touched the top of his nephew’s head. The sparse bit of hair felt like his Velveteen rabbit.

“We’re gonna call him Richard,” said Billy.

“Richie,” whispered Tommy.

###

It was now November, three months after Richard’s birth. Tommy had turned seven in October and was proving to be an amazing uncle. He wasn’t allowed to carry Richard around the house, and whenever he asked to hold Richie he received a terse reply about not being old enough.

The last letter he wrote to Santa Claus went unanswered. He figured that because it was getting so close to Christmas Santa was just really busy. He hadn’t mentioned anything to Aunt May about it because she was really busy with Richard and all. She had to stay in bed for two weeks after he was born. Tommy was eavesdropping outside the bedroom door before the doctor left and overheard him tell Billy that she had torn three inches. Tommy just figured Aunt May would get out her needle and thread and sew back up whatever had torn. After all, May sewed up his pants when he fell and tore out the knee and she crocheted the red-and-white blanket for Richie.

May stayed in bed for two weeks and Tommy would skip into her room after school and sit with her and Richie. May let Tommy place Richie in his wooden cradle once, but he had to be extra careful and make sure to support Richie’s head. Tommy and Billy had built the cradle by hand and worked on perfecting their wood-whittling technique. The right side belonged to Billy and was perfectly straight and edged with

precision. The left side, however, Tommy's side, was jagged and imperfect, but nobody made any mention of it.

May prepared dinner in the kitchen one evening and was interrupted by Tommy racing in from the bedroom

"Aunt May! There's something wrong with Richie," he screamed. May dropped a drumstick on the floor and followed Tommy into the bedroom. She wiped her hands on her apron quickly before entering the bedroom. She could hear Richie in his hand-made cradle softly cooing and blowing the occasional bubble. May peered over the cradle and immediately knew why Tommy was so alarmed.

"He's...he's," she started.

"He's BLUE!" cried Tommy.

May gathered up Richie in his quilt and held his chest up to her ear. She could hear his heart beating and feel air entering and leaving his lungs. She opened his tiny mouth and stuck her finger inside to check if there was something lodged.

"Should I get the doctor?" asked Tommy.

"I don't know," answered May. "Go get your mother."

May held Richie until Tommy came back into the room with Dorothy.

"Let me have a look at him," she said.

May pulled back the blanket that covered most of his face and an audible intake of breath could be heard from Dorothy.

"Oh my Lord," she exclaimed. "Let's walk down to the Doc's and see what he has to say."

May, Dorothy, and Tommy walked the gravel road to Dr. Freelanders' office which was also his home. They all stood back while the doctor examined Richie.

"Has he been eating well?" asked the doctor.

"I can't stop him from eating," replied May.

"Have you noticed any changes in his behavior or sleeping patterns?"

"No," said May.

Dr. Freelanders placed his stethoscope back around his neck and handed Richie back to May.

"The only thing I can hear is slight variation in rhythm of his heartbeat. The change in color would lead me to believe that he is having a hard time getting oxygen. He is going to have to be monitored constantly. I'm going to get in contact with a colleague of mine down at Henry Ford and see about having a heart specialist come in."

May buried her face in the quilt on the way home from the doctor. She didn't want Tommy to see her cry in fear of scaring him.

"We just have to really watch him," Dorothy said to Tommy.

"Can I stay home from school?" he asked.

"No. You still have to go to school. We can handle things while you are learning your p's and q's."

Christmas was around the corner and Tommy was beyond excited. May and her in-laws had talked it over months ago that the buggy and silver rattle would be from Santa. May never understood how Billy's parents managed to stay afloat until she saw William, Sr. pulling jars out from underneath the house. She snooped later and found wads of money lined up neatly. She asked Billy about it.

“He never liked the banks even before ’29,” he said. “They still lost more than half of what they had, but it could be worse. They can keep the house for a little while longer, but Dad’s gotta find work. Goddam GM. I told him to start making whiskey again, but he doesn’t want to with Tommy in the house.”

“Whiskey?”

“Damn good whiskey. I should start making it. Smells better than the fish.”

“You better not,” snapped May.

May had finally gotten the hang of juggling housework and the constant monitoring of Richie and tried to resume her usual routine of meeting Tommy outside when he came home from school. Tommy stopped at the mailbox and pulled out the letters. He shuffled through them and sighed.

May instantly realized she had forgotten about the letters. His last few must have gotten picked up by the mailman and been sucked into the North Pole mail that goes nowhere. She had to make it right.

“You know, Tommy, there have been some problems with the mail lately,” she lied. “Maybe yours got lost. I think you should write one more time.”

“Do you really think I should?” he asked.

“I think so.”

Tommy wrote another letter to Santa Claus, and May was ready for it this time. After he left for school the next day she went out to the mailbox and snagged Tommy’s letter. She looked down at his handwriting on the envelope, the excitement etched into every letter.

“May!” someone yelled from inside the house.

“Yeah!” she yelled back. She went into the house and towards her bedroom.

Billy met her at the door with Richard in his arms.

“We need the doctor,” he said as he raced past her towards the door. May put Tommy’s letter in the rolltop desk and ran to catch up with Billy.

“What’s wrong,” she asked. “Let me have him.”

“No, May. We have to hurry.” Billy ran down the driveway and onto the street. May followed. They ran the entire way to Dr. Freeland’s house.

###

May dropped the curtain to the front window when she saw that Tommy was walking up the street to the house. He got the mail as usual. Tommy came through the front door and was surprised to see his Aunt May and his brother hugging each other and crying. Dorothy and William, Sr. were crying too.

“Come here, Thomas,” said his father.

“Daddy, what’s wrong? Where’s Richie?”

Everyone broke apart and sat down. May and Billy on the sofa and Dorothy and William, Sr., on the loveseat. May reached out her hand to still Tommy’s trembling.

“Tommy, sweetie, when you were at school, Billy and I had to take Richie to the doctor because he wasn’t breathing,” she explained. “We didn’t make it in time, honey. Richie...he’s not coming home.”

Tommy’s eyes welled up with tears. “No!” he yelled. “He was supposed to get his buggy and his rattle for Christmas – Santa promised,” he cried. “Why would he promise?” Dorothy and May stood up and tried to hug him, but he pushed her away and ran out the door.

“Tommy!” they yelled after him, but he was down the street before they could even get out the door.

May spent hours curled up in her bed and Billy spent more time in the fish house than ever before. The days following were somber and an eerie cloud hung over the house. May and Billy had decided not to have a funeral.

“It’s just going to make things harder than they already are,” he explained. “Besides, we can’t really afford it anyway.”

“It’s fine. I just wish we had enough money for a proper headstone. We’ll have to save up. I wouldn’t feel right asking your parents to help us – they’ve helped enough,” said May.

“I’ll just keep on bustin’ my ass in the fish house. Joe said he may have some work for me down at the track,” Billy said in a low voice. “It’ll just be us and Pastor Beck. We didn’t even get to baptize him, least we can do is give him a prayer.” May and Billy laid on opposite sides of their bed and fell asleep.

William Sr., Dorothy, Tommy, May, Billy, and Pastor Beck gathered at the cemetery where Richard would be laid to rest. His pine coffin was barely bigger than a shoe box. Pastor Beck said a prayer and comforted the small crowd before leaving the cemetery. May knelt in front of the dank hole that was now her son’s home and cried softly to herself. She looked around at the other headstones, trying to remember whose names appeared on them so that she could find Richard when she needed him. May plucked some of the dead grass from the ground that was still visible through the thin layer of snow. It was time to leave. Tommy didn’t come to the gravesite. Instead, he

chose to stay behind and sit on the wooden bench under a willow tree several yards from Richie's grave.

"I'll get him," said May as the rest of the family started to leave. She walked over to Tommy and sat next to him on the bench.

"You know you were the greatest uncle anyone could have had, right?" May said quietly.

Tommy looked up at her with tears in his blue eyes. His eyes were not bright like May remembered them, but overcast like the Michigan sky. "If I didn't have to go to stupid school maybe I would have found him before it was too late," he said wiping away the evidence of his grief.

"You heard what the doctor said, honey. What Richie had was something that can't be cured."

"It's not fair," he pouted, crossing his arms in front of him.

"No, it's not, but you'll have other nieces and nephews, God willing, and they will love to have an Uncle Tommy. Just because Richie is gone doesn't mean that we have to forget him," she said.

Tommy hopped off the bench and walked away. May went after him and stopped him from running away from her. She knelt down and looked him in the eyes wanting to say something to make him stop crying, but there was nothing to say. She just grabbed him and held him in her arms as he cried.

May returned to the house holding Tommy's hand. Dorothy had set out some leftover food that had been brought by the neighbors. Nobody really wanted to eat, but a fork would eventually make contact with some raisin salad or bread pudding. May,

however, went to her room and sat down at the desk putting her face in her hands. She looked up and staring back at her was Tommy's last letter to Santa. She never had the opportunity to respond. May ran her fingers over the outside of the envelope where Tommy had written the address. She opened the letter and began reading. She was exhausted from the day and would respond some other time. She put the letter in between the pages of worn Shakespeare book that she had taken with her when she left with Billy.

The next morning, Tommy ruffled through his schoolbag while May prepared his lunch. Today was no different than any other: two slices of white bread, a slice of cheese, and an apple. Billy was putting on his fishing gear to restock the fish house.

"I don't have any paper," said Tommy.

"Go get you some outta the desk in there," said Billy.

May was lost in thought about the hours of fish cleaning and did not hear their exchange. She wiped off her hands and brought Tommy's lunch pail over to the table.

"Where'd he go?" she asked Billy.

"Ran out of paper, so he's getting some from the desk."

"Oh, no."

May ran to the bedroom, hoping she could stop what was about to happen. There sat Tommy on the edge of the chair with his most recent letter in one hand, and the wax seal in the other.

"Oh, Tommy."

Tommy stared at her blankly; no expression, no emotion.

"Tommy."

He threw the wax seal to the other side of the room, tore the letter in two, and ran out of the bedroom. May ran after him, but he was too quick. He had already grabbed his bag and lunch pail before May could round the corner.

“Tommy, wait! I can explain.”

He was gone.

“Explain what?” asked Billy.

“Nothing. It’s nothing. I should have let him hold Richie,” she said under her breath.

Poetry

Through the Window

I went to the basement
for a can of peaches,
not knowing the creaky steps
gave away my every move.

The can was in the very back
and I had to stretch my fingers
as far out as they would go
just to touch the rim.

Peaches in heavy syrup
was a treat only given
when good reports
came home from school.
But I didn't care about school—
I wanted something sweet.

I thought I was alone
and could sneak them back upstairs.
I turned on my heel
and was met by Mr. Baker—
the mustached man
who took me away from my sister.

The ends of his mouth turned up.
He stared at the peaches in my hand.
My stomach lurched
and I tried to run past him.
He caught my braid
and pulled me back.
I threw the peach can on his foot
hoping he would let go.

He forced me on the floor
I screamed
but no one could hear me
except the cement walls.

I tried to focus on something else
maybe look through the window,
but the sun hurt my eyes
I didn't want to look at him.

I bit my lower lip
the tears came anyway.
The floor was cold on my back
The back of my head hit the cement again and again.

His tobacco breath
made me have to turn my face
only this time it wasn't the sun
but the can of peaches leaking syrup
on the floor.

Don't Let Go

The brown leather suitcases
sit in the driveway
as I look out the finger-printed window.
My little sister can't find her Velveteen rabbit.
She starts crying.

Step-mother leans on the door frame with a smirk.
Papa says it's time to go.
I thumb away the tears on my sister's pink cheeks
and whisper in her ear.
"It's gonna be okay," I say,
not knowing if I am lying.

Two black cars park at the street.
I am to go with the mustached man
my sister with the plump old lady.
We would not be going together.

I clutch her tiny hand and glare at my father.
"Time to go," Papa says.

She cries once more, but I refuse.
I hold her close
taking in the sweet smell of cotton from her navy blue pea-coat.
The brown curls in her hair tied neatly with a bow,
her slender fingers,
and her triangle nose – I have the same one.

Hands grip my shoulders and pull me away,
but I won't let go.
Her hands are in mine
and I hold on tight.

The man who would be my new father hoists me over his shoulder,
and my sister cries out
as her new mother leads her to the car.

I wait until I am in the back seat
and even though I bite down hard on my bottom lip
the tears run down my face.
I will not look out the window.

Little Girls Should Have Dolls

Grandma stole perfume from her step-mother
and sold it at the flea market
to save up sixty-five cents.

She walked into the shop
proudly handed over her earnings
and walked out with a Kewpie doll.

The plastic-headed doll
with the hair molded into style.
Fake rosy colored cheeks—
too red to be real.
Little hand sewn outfits
maybe overalls and shiny boots.

Skipping up the porch steps
and into the front door
of the white bricked house
she was hoping to sneak it upstairs
before anyone would notice.

But Papa spotted it and knew
the doll had not come from him.
He took it away.

Months had gone by
Grandma forgot about the doll
and hoped to get something fun
for Christmas.

Her Papa handed her one gift
wrapped in newspaper.
She tore through the paper
excited to see what was inside.

She opened the box
and the doll she worked for
stared back at her.

It was the only doll she ever had
and I realize now
why she bought so many for me.

Skipping Stones

The dream in my head plays
like a piano roll.
A young man stands by the shore,
water grazing his toes.

He thinks he's alone
and scoops up a smooth stone.
Just before flicking it sideways
he rubs it between his fingers.

A young girl giggles
as the stone plunks into the water
leaving ripples
that remained
for decades.

When I wake
I remember that
Nana and Papa met this way—
then hated each other for sixty years.

Maybe if they had remembered
the laughter from that day,
their music would not have faded
with the sinking of the stones.

The Fall

The panty hose around my neck
should hold me
about three inches from the cement floor
where you fix the car and spend hours
ignoring me.

No more tea in the whiskey bottle,
or hiding on the roof
when the sharks come to collect.

I should write this in a letter
For you to find alongside
My dangling body,
But instead I keep it to myself.

All I have to do is take one step
And it will all be over.
No more bruises to hide
Children to mourn
Errands to run.

I lift my right foot
And then my left
Reach for the nylon
That will take my last breath.

I can only hear
The sound of my own heart—
It's happening
I'm dying.

Hands pull at me
It must be Satan
Pulling me to the middle ring
I blink
Expecting to wake
And be transformed into a thorny bush,
but instead
I am greeted by a tearful face
And two words "I'm sorry."

Three Seconds

My grandpa never talked about Korea
except once.

He recalled the mud—
About three inches deep
seeping through his black boots and white socks.
And the trenches
protecting him from No Man's Land.
M1's popped, soldiers screamed, some were silenced;
a rifleman at the far end fell backwards.

"Move the line down," yelled the commander.
My grandpa un-suctioned his feet from the muck
and stepped to the right.

No sooner had his feet sunk back in,
when the faceless man who moved to his spot
took a fatal bullet.

I sat with hands folded, mesmerized by this tale
And the first thing that came to mind was—
What if grandpa had died that day?

My dad wouldn't have had to hide
the black and blue bruises
from the belt connecting with his back
or explain away a swollen nose.

My uncle wouldn't have been beaten
as a child because he wouldn't stop crying
or feared being sent to the basement
to hold on to the water pipe overhead.

But I wouldn't have had homemade newspaper hats
on my birthdays,
or swung so high on the playground
that I almost fell out of the seat,
or learned how a bishop can only move diagonally.

Three little seconds.

A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Bathroom

Pulled the ivory sheets up
Tucked a pillow between my knees
Hugged the dachshund lying next to me.

Tossed and turned
Wound up on my back
Hugged the pillow 'til it was flat.

Woke up around three
And had to go
So I swung my legs around real slow.

Trudged to the powder room
Easily enough
Didn't know the trip back would be so rough.

One foot in front of the other
Then I stopped
The dark bedroom spun and I dropped.

My husband said
He thought the house was collapsing
But no, it was just my vasovagal syncope relapsing.

He peeled me off the floor
Put me back in the bed
I managed to fall asleep after dropping myself on my own head.

The next day I awoke
With a throb in my face
Black, blue, and yellow all over the place.

The lesson's been learned
But not without scars
I'll get myself to the bed the next time I see stars.

Pennzoil: A true story

Driving to school like any other day
Strapped into the passenger seat
of my sister's yellow Mustang GT
Rocking out to...Sheryl Crow?

My sister turns the wheel
to make the left turn
for the road to school.

Then my world went black.

When I opened my eyes
the black leather I was used to seeing
was hazy
like someone threw sand in my face.
I tried to move my legs.
I couldn't feel them.

My neck burned and my head nodded.
My wrist was crooked
and all I could smell was the motor oil
leaking out of the engine.

I shut my eyes again
and woke up in a hospital bed.
My mother and sister were nearby
I heard them but could not see them.
I blinked and blinked and nothing
until finally they came into focus.
The gunpowder from the air bag
Had exploded in my face
caked in my eyes
and burned the flesh on my chin and neck.
I tried to touch my chin but they wouldn't let me.

The doctor came in and said they'd have to cut my hair.
Snip, snip went his scissors
around the Nike Swoosh size gash on my head.
An inch all the way around the wound I would soon find out
as he fired the staples into my scalp.

I went home, head wrapped in white gauze
black eyes, swollen lip, burnt face
and seat belt welts all over the front of me.

The next day I got in the shower
looked down
and screamed.
I was standing in a pool of my own blood
that had washed out of my hair.
Handfuls clogged the drain.
My mom jumped in the shower and rescued me.

I used to like the smell of gas stations,
but now I make my husband get the oil changed.
I don't use Herbal Essence shampoo anymore,
and I always check my mirror before making a left turn.

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Education/Certifications:

University of Central Florida

Bachelor of Arts, 5/2005

Major: English

Kennesaw State University

Master of Arts in Professional Writing (in process; completion date May 2012)

Graduate Research Assistant for Georgia Writers Association

Graduate Research Assistant for “Careers in Writing” website development

Georgia Professional Standards Commission

Clear Renewable Certificate

Valid through 2014

Middle Grades (Language Arts, Science, Social Studies, and Mathematics)

English 6-12

Early Childhood Education

Experience:

Forsyth County Schools

07/2009 – present

Language Arts Teacher

Liberty Middle School, Cumming, GA

- Responsible for 8th grade Language Arts curriculum and instruction
- **100% Meets and/or Exceeds on 2010-2011 CRCT Reading**
- **95% Meets and or Exceeds on 2011-2012 Middle Grades Writing**
- Writing Across the Curriculum Team
- Literacy by Design Collaborative funded by The Gates Foundation
- Common Core Curriculum Team
- “Bring Your Own Technology” teacher
- Leadership Team/Language Arts Team Leader
- 8th Grade Basketball Cheerleading Coach

Life Science Teacher

Liberty Middle School, Cumming, GA

- Responsible for 7th grade Life Science curriculum and instruction
- Follow lesson planning guidelines set by NCLB & GPS
- 7th Grade Basketball Cheerleading Coach
- Extended Learning Teacher – 6th Grade Reading
- 98% Meets and/or Exceeds on 2009-10 CRCT Science

Lake County School Board

01/2007 – 07/2009

Language Arts Teacher

Oak Park Middle School, Leesburg, FL

- **Sandy Gilbert Award Winner – Rookie Teacher of the Year 2009-2010**
- Ruby Payne trained – Understanding Poverty and Research-Based Strategies for students in Poverty and Low-Performing Schools

- Florida Online Reading Professional Development
- 94% passing scores on FCAT Writes 2008-2009 (8th grade)
- Responsible for 7th and 8th grade curriculum and instruction
- Followed lesson planning guidelines set by NCLB and Sunshine State Standards
- Differentiated instruction including PowerPoint presentations, integration of Orchard software, Accelerated Reader program, FCAT Explorer, Evaluwrite, cooperative and project-based learning
- Increased parental involvement in students' educational development through conferences, phone conversations, and letters to parents
- STEP Team Sponsor (2007-2008)
- National Junior Honor Society Advisor
- School Advisory Council Member
- Fall Festival and Holocaust Museum trip coordinator

Language Arts Teacher

Eustis High School, Eustis, FL

- Responsible for English III and English III honors curriculum and instruction
- Followed lesson planning guidelines set by NCLB and the Sunshine State Standards
- Managed three classes of 25-30 students (block scheduling)
- Daily presentations to class covering topics such as literature, poetry, presentations, and essay writing

Special Skills:

- Improvisation and Interactive Performance Training
- Develop and implement long-term action plans
- Analyze and present statistical analysis
- Strong work ethic and sound business judgment
- Organizational and time management skills
- Verbal, written communication, and interpersonal skills
- Detail-orientation, multi-tasked orientation, and self-motivation skills
- Presentation and project management skills
- Follow-up and problem solving skills
- Proofreading, editing and grammar skills

Computer Skills (Proficient in all):

- 50-75 wpm
- Adobe Photoshop
- Esembler & Infinite Campus
- Final Draft
- Microsoft Office, Publisher, and Photostory
- Web Design – Frontpage and Dreamweaver
- Paint Shop Pro
- Active(SMART) Board
- WebCT and Angel Online Learning Management Systems
- Criterion Writing Assessment Program